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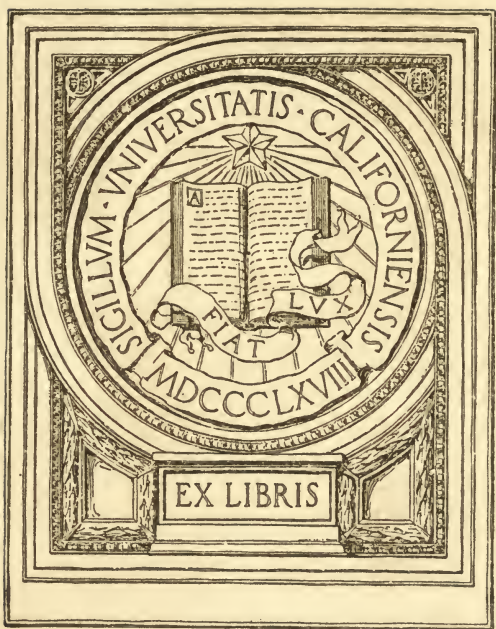


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A STEP ON THE STAIR



OCTAVE THANET



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A STEP ON THE STAIR

A STEP ON THE STAIR

By

OCTAVE THANET

Author of

THE MAN OF THE HOUR, THE LION'S SHARE
BY INHERITANCE, ETC.



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A STEP ON THE STAIR

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TO THE
ABSTRACT

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THE nurse gently withdrew the thermometer from a sagging mouth and carried it to the window. Her back was to the patient; but his heavy eyelids lifted and he watched her with the furtive vigilance of the very sick.

The slanting glory of a late March sun bathed her white-capped head and her white-clad shoulders. It silhouetted in violet the hand holding the tiny glass tube. As she caught the reading there was a slight sudden vibration of this hand. Doctor Roger Hamilton's near-sighted eyes, unaided by the big black-rimmed glasses (without which his world

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would hardly recognize the great surgeon), found only a blurred impression of action; yet—he guessed. And when she stole past him to the hall, closing the door with wariest care, he caught its infinitesimal creak and knew that she shut it lest he hear her at the telephone.

A moment later it did not surprise him to find his sister at his side. Her fingers crept to his wrist, trembling and cold. But a deadlier chill was in his heart. So! He had lost! Fighting would be useless. Indeed, he had no fight left in him; he was spent. Poor Sis! just really recovering from her husband's death. Sis and he had been through a lot together. And the boy,—only child, mighty fine, plucky enthusiastic chap; but needing a man's hand. Still, Amy was a

wise woman; they would get on somehow.

It wasn't because of Amy and the boy that the worst pain racked him. It was having to die before completing his big discovery. Six months would be enough, and for the lack of that pitiful little dole of time men and women must go on suffering and dying by inches. He knew. He had watched his mother perish in torture by the hideous Thing. A thousand times his heart had been wrung. Oh, God! how patient she was, how brave,—planning for other people, trying to spare him by pretending she didn't know, making little jokes! How he used to go off and sob in sheer helplessness! Then, afterward, how many years he had groped! What toil, what disappoint-

ment! At last to come so near riding the world of the pest—and a fool boy and his crazy old automobile to spoil it all! Well, he had to take the chance; he couldn't crunch the kid's car to junk. He wasn't lashing himself now for that; it was for his idiotic reticence. Suppose Jim Forbes *had* jeered. There wasn't a cleverer operator in the country; but he didn't know it all, with his pig-headed Scotch caution.

Why hadn't he spoken out? Tentative descriptions in clinics were rubbish. He was afraid, afraid to risk his reputation, that was why. "I'm a cursed rotten coward!" he raged. "And I've got the hook!"—while Amy's cold fingers felt for his thread of a pulse.

Suddenly she saw a change. The

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ashen features lightened with the half-humorous, half-whimsical smile that his familiars knew. He was thinking, "I've no business to go off mad, this way. It's unprofessional to die in a temper. I've got to think up something pleasant for Sis to remember. And tell Jim—"

But somehow his mind would not work—a mind that had been so docile and so swift. Now the willing servant balked; pushed him off into vast spaces and strange visions. Some of these were vivid, more, flittering and formless, like clouds skurrying through mist.

He tried to speak, at least to press the hand clasping his own; but his lax fingers would not tighten; his stiff lips wouldn't move. He felt the prick of a hypodermic needle amid

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the pinch of a fold of flesh; he heard voices, thin as if from a far distance—then the visions and the spaces conquered.

MEMORY did not summon anything out of his later years of fame; nor that quiet and fruitful time after his wife's death. And of all his discordant married life no more returned than a wraith of Delia's beautiful petulant face; and once the echo of her voice upbraiding him: "Why *will* you take poor patients who can not pay proper prices?"

But for the most part he saw only trivial and inconsequent images of his childhood. Roger's father had died at the wrong moment of large schemes. Therefore Roger (only ten, but the oldest of the three children) and his mother fought with poverty in a strange land. "Partner," she used to call him. He could hear her now, and the word was sweet in his ear.

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He could see himself, a morsel of a boy with a big forehead and a frown, demanding, "Mama, why do you always cut the nice things into three pieces instead of four?" His own apparition came in various guise. Now, he was running through the sloppy streets with his huge pack of newspapers, in the chill dusk of a winter day. His broken shoes were so wet that they squeaked. Now, he was staring up at the lighted windows of the great house of the town (his little sweetheart's home), wistfully admiring the gas-jets and the leaping fireside flames. Now, he was yearning over the flaunting advertisements of a panorama; and turning away to behold that silver, shining dollar at his very feet. How his grimy little fist swooped down on it! And—yes,

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there was that same grand lady with the purple feather in her bonnet coming back to find her dollar. Well, she got it,—he wasn't brought up to keep other people's money,—but he had to whistle to keep from sniffing. He did no sniffing when he told his mother. He laughed; and she said, "Of course." But she kissed him; and that night she gave him his father's watch. Through all the phantasmagoria one figure moved constantly. Always he was seeing his mother. It was very comforting.

Presently he needed comfort; for the visions changed. He saw, after so many years, the delicate beauty of his boyish sweetheart, who never knew that he cared. He saw himself walking all the weary miles to her grave, far behind the carriages, be-

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cause he could not bear his mates' company. He heard his mother's voice and saw her in the buggy which she had hired. She who had so few dollars! "I knew you wouldn't want to go with the class; but I thought you wouldn't mind *me*," she said. She spoke in her ordinary tone,—she was too wise in grief to be tender,—but how inexpressibly soothing she was! He had lost his childish faith so gradually and so completely that it never occurred to him in his extremity to pray; but— "Oh," longed a tired dying man, "if I were only going to see my mother again!"

Then he did see her. It was no counterfeit of delirium, neither was it the brave worn mask smiling its unconquerable courage to the last; it was the face of his childhood's wor-

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ship, his young, radiant, beautiful mother's face.

They often told how he, who seemed drifting out like foam on the tide, too weak for a whisper, had called happily, aloud, "Why, Mother!"

"Of course, Partner," said she. In her old pleasant fashion she took his hand; just as she used to take the hand of a little boy.

The touch — which, nevertheless, was not a touch but contact of some subtler yet satisfying sort—gave the man of fifty the boy's glow of comfort and immeasurable security.

THEY were passing together. Now they were in the hall. Its rich stateliness had been so much more the architect's endowment than Roger's that he had never felt at home in it; but now he was fain to linger. As he hesitated, he saw Addie Wales, the night nurse, flying down the passage. What a grotesque parody of her immaculate self she was with no cap, and her nurse's apron tied askew over a pink silk kimono! She was in such haste that when she caught up the letter waiting for her on the little table outside the sick room, she thrust it at her apron pocket and never noticed that it missed the pocket (which wasn't surprising, as the apron was wrong side out) and tumbled to the floor. There it lay, gleaming white

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on the darkly polished boards, while she sped past into the bedchamber.

Doctor Hamilton glanced at the sealed letter. Despite the stiff envelope and the flap of blank paper, he saw the sentences plainly.

“DEAR ADDIE—You were perfectly all right. She is a cat! I leave this mouse-trap to-morrow!”

“Great Scott!” ejaculated Roger Hamilton, “I must be dead, to read through a three-ply envelope!”

But he recoiled as a young housemaid pushed an agitated presence through a suddenly opened door; he sent a glance of dismay downward, seeking his bare feet. *There was nothing there.* It gave him a very strange and eery sensation.

“Well, at least, if I can’t see my-

self, I guess she can't see me," he reflected.

Nor did she seem to see him,—hastily and automatically picking up the letter and pushing it into the drawer of a cabinet near by, and running down the stairs.

"Come, Son," said his mother.

"Can't I see Sis one second?" he pleaded.

She shook her head; he fancied that she sighed; and immediately, with no intervention of descending the stairway, they seemed to be in the dining-room. He would have halted, for he remembered the friends who had made so merry around the great table, and the sight of his own armchair gave him a pang; but again they were away. A second they halted on the dun-green lawn where the golden

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sunset haze was flooding muffled shrubs and silent fountain; and Roger heard the pant of a motor-car coming at a furious pace. "There's old Jim," he divined. "Whew! scraped the bumpers!"

Doctor Forbes was crouched over the wheel; his schoolboy son's hat with its gay ribbon was jammed over a face set and gray as the stone. Came a-running, didn't he? Poor old Jim, he was going to take it pretty hard!

"Come, Dear," Roger heard his mother's voice with the bewilderment but also the blessed reliance of a child. "Yes, Ma'am," he assented meekly—like the little boy.

"We will go slowly at first," said she.

THE slowness must needs have been comparative only, since in an inappreciable span of time they were above the swarming city streets with their men and horses and long-bodied motor-cars crawling ant fashion between the high buildings, above the fresh black furrows of the Middle Western farming country, above the farmsteads and the tall elm trees, finally, above the clouds themselves.

By insensible degrees the marvel of it possessed Roger. The scientist's ardent and daring curiosity crept into his soul. Moreover, he became aware of an exquisite sensation. Utterly gone were the raw pains of his wounds, the miserable discomfort of the anesthetic; the weight of years had dropped as absolutely as a bur-

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den drops when a knife cuts the rope that binds it. Every breath renewed in him the ecstasy of youth's illimitable sense of power.

"Shall I never be tired again?" he exclaimed.

"Not in your body. But you may be tired in your soul. We lose only our bodies; we keep our souls."

"I hadn't dared to hope it."

"I know; but the truth of things went on being true just the same, though you had ceased to believe it."

"Mother, you're delicious!" exulted Roger. "You're making fun of me precisely the same way you always did. And it's grand, your knowing everything here. I feel just like a kid again."

"That's why mothers usually go before their children. They have an-

other happy time of being trusted entirely."

"It's a mighty nice arrangement. Now tell me. Is—is it like what you expected here?"

She laughed, her very same lovely rippling laugh of amusement. It was so comforting to hear it again! "Roger," said she, "not one little bit."

"But—but father's here, and little Mabel, and—"

"Oh, yes, it's true—

"‘And with the morn those angel
faces smile
Which I have loved long since, and
lost a while.’”

While they talked he had been too absorbed to take note of their surroundings; but now he gazed about him.

This it was, he reflected, to be in

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pure space. There was nothing visible of earth or sky. Nor was there any kind of faintest sound. And the light was dimmer than moonlight.

"It—it doesn't stay like this all the time, does it?" he said. "It's lonesome."

"Death is always lonesome. No, it doesn't stay but a very little while."

"It would be lonesome, I meant, without you. I don't mind in the least if you are here. Besides, I'm glad to have a chance to find out things—first. I'll be glad to see my father."

"He wants so to see you. You poor boy, you had to grow up without him! He will see you, even if—" she hesitated; and he felt a little shiver such as creeps on one sitting by the kindly firelight when of a sudden the night

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wind rises and sobs outside. Instantly it was gone; for she was smiling and saying, "Mabel is so anxious to see you! And Lydia—you remember Lydia?"

"Dear, little, dainty creature! She never cared for me; but—"

"Foolish boy! She always cared. When she was drowning almost her last conscious thought was, 'If Roger were here, he wouldn't let me drown!' "

"I wouldn't, either, bless her!"

"And Delia is here, you know?"

"How is Delia?" asked Roger. His downcast air revealed his consciousness that he ought to have shown some concern for Delia before. "I hope she's happy."

"It has always taken considerable to make Delia happy," replied his

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mother, with an effect of dryness; “but she is happier. She hopes you will forgive her; and she is sure that you realize now that it is well that two such discordant natures have no children to bind them—”

“I wouldn’t bother her for the world,” interrupted Roger hastily. “Please ask her to forgive me, too. Er—r, Delia seems to—resemble herself a good deal.”

“How else would she be herself? Dying doesn’t transform people. It helps us; but it doesn’t change us into—well, angels, as we used to think. This is but a step on the stair, as Aunt Thyrza says.”

“Bless the old sport!” chuckled Roger, “she caught her death toting the banner in an equal suffrage procession; but she said it was worth it.

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She said in her next incarnation she should see women voting. How does she take it finding out?"

"She hasn't found out."

"Do you mean the theosophists are right and we do come back?"

"I don't think so; but I don't know. I only know we have another chance in this world just as we had a chance on earth; only here we remember."

"Do you mean we get a new deal all over? No punishment for anything we've done on earth? Wipe off the slate clean?"

"Yes, Dear; but it is the same hand that writes on the clean slate. Ourselves are our reward and our punishment; and we can't escape ourselves."

"Then there is pain here?"

"Pain is too valuable to lose. Only the perfect can do without pain, or

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fear; for we have laws here, and sometimes foolish wicked people try to break them."

"What happens then?"

"I am not permitted to tell you. But—look!"

Roger's glance obeying her gesture, he saw a great dark creature approaching at such terrific speed that the air vibrated like rarefied steam. He was wagging a disheveled head and huddling his soiled rags up to his chin. Abreast of them he turned on Roger a visage distorted by a kind of raging terror. Roger, unutterably shocked, recognized a man whom he had opposed more than once on earth; a man of colossal power and success, but of loose life and ruthless passions.

"Stripped! Oh, God! *stripped*,"

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he shuddered in his throat; and the wind took him.

“Why is he like that?” whispered Roger in awe and pity.

“He broke our laws. He has had to see himself as he is.”

“Mother,” said Roger wearily, “you were right; we can get tired. Isn’t there some little place where we can go and rest until I can pull myself together a bit, where there are clouds—it is so lonesome without clouds!”

“Surely,” she said. She looked as if she understood.

ALMOST as she spoke they emerged into a sea of mist, borderless, like the ether, but more palpable. The light here was neither of sun nor moon, but touched delicately with green and violet hues; softly, opaquely luminous, with the milky glow of opals. Their motion was as the motion of limbs under water, could water be at once buoyant and unresisting.

Until this moment Roger had hardly been conscious of progress, since they left the last clouds behind; but now he was made aware, in some mysterious wise, that they had traversed an immense distance. Obscurely, also, he perceived that they were passing a multitude of hurrying shapes. These he could not distinguish in outline; but rather in

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masses, as if they were defined only by shadow, after the manner of impressionist painters. They were like men, yet were not men; and Roger knew that they must be disembodied spirits who had but just made their flitting.

A single one of them came near enough to assume the semblance of life; this, a little boy who still kept tousled reddish hair and a wide smile on a very thin face. Roger was sure that he had been lame in spite of the remarkable agility with which he was kicking and jumping, as he sped by. "Gee! but it's great, sprinting without crutches!" he shouted. "Me for the Angel Track!"

His mother checked Roger, who would have gone to aid him, saying, "He doesn't need us. See, there come

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his mates and a little girl and a woman. Don't they look happy!"

But all that Roger could see was an exceeding bright light, a disk of radiant whiteness, into which the little figure seemed to swim, eluding his gaze.

"Can't you see, Dear?" There was almost a plaintive cadence in his mother's tone. "I suppose not; but I am almost sure you can hear. Come."

IN the footfall of a thought they had drifted down another highway of space and turned aside into a quiet close, walled and vaulted by clouds, through which ran tender shades of rose, azure, and silvery mauve, which, parting in one division, revealed a broad expanse of tranquil light. All the peaceful scene was penetrated by invisible music. Whence it came, from celestial violins and muted strings or from angel voices, Roger knew as little as he could distinguish words of its language—if language there were. But in that divine *andante* he could hear every happy sound of his life. The carol of the bird on the bough, the patter of his pet dog's feet, the cheers of his schoolmates, the rush of the wind

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against a galloping rider, the rustle of leaves where a youth and a maiden loitered under the forest arches, the sweet high pipe of his little nephew, the faint accents of men and women rescued from the shadow of death, the good voices of his friends, the gentle laughter of his childish sweetheart, the hymns that his mother sang,—they all came back, awakening a throng of memories. As he listened, those exquisite notes renewed the innocent joys of childhood, the brave dreams of youth, the sadder, larger endeavor of manhood.

His mother's arm stole round his neck. "Oh, if you only might see them!" she longed. "Your father's there, and Mabel and Lydia, and so many, many good friends of yours, so many grateful people! Now

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they're smiling and waving and blessing you. Oh, my Dear, my Dear!"

He, too, smiled and waved his hand, his heart going faster—as if he could have a heart; but there was assuredly a counterpart of the experience. Slowly, in a diminuendo of thrilling sweetness, the unearthly choral faded away. Silence followed and a pang of loss and awe comparable to nothing in Roger Hamilton's knowledge. He felt an impulse to ask poignant questions; but reverence kept him dumb. When at last he spoke it was indirectly.

He said, "You always loved Saint Francis—have you—have you met him?"

"The centuries are too far apart, Dear."

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"Haven't you met any of the old saints or martyrs?"

"Not yet."

"Maybe you've seen some angels or—or holy personages?"

"No, Dear."

"But there are angels?"

"I hope so. I don't know."

"But, great Scott, Mother!" Roger broke out, quite forgetting that he had resolved to curb his undignified habit of speech, so ill becoming a glorified spirit — well, anyhow, a spirit, "don't you know *anything* religious?"

"Very little, Son," she confessed, smiling. "We need faith here as much as on earth. Perhaps in the next existence—"

"But—don't we stay here?"

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"This is but a step on the stair. We leave it as we left the life below; but joyfully and not in fear, for each step is higher on the stair."

"Then there is parting here, too?"

"Even here. Yet, don't be frightened. This life is infinitely longer than yours; we shall all be reunited. We shall wait for you, if you do not come now."

Again Roger felt that chill sinking of the heart. "Do you mean I'm not to stay here—with you?"

She looked at him, smiling; but he seemed to see again that woful smile of her last tormented months on earth.

"I suppose," said he humbly, "you mean I don't know how to behave in this lovely world, and need to go to

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some kind of spiritual kindergarten to learn. I've tried to lead a clean decent life; but I've been too busy to study beauty. Delia always said my taste was worse than frivolous, it was flippant. And poor Amy couldn't pull me up to Celtic poetry. I fell asleep, the day I had the accident, over Fiona McLeod. I like her—or him—too."

"You've no call to grovel, Laddie," and now her smile was the very gleam that had irradiated his bleak childhood. "Maybe you can't describe the heavenly vision; but you were never disobedient to it."

"I might have been a lot patienter with Delia. And I used to get beastly irritable when the nurses were stupid. And the way I've abused Jim Forbes

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for his infer—there I go again! I can't seem to refrain from using language."

"But you were always faithful, from a little child. That is why, I think, so great a mercy is accorded you. Dear, you may stay—or you may go back to finish your work."

"Go back?" he uttered thickly. "Be aching and old and—but it can't be! Such a thing never was!"

"Oh, yes, Dear. It is recorded."

Roger was not heeding her. He flung out his arms with a deep exclamation: "Oh, how strong I feel, how light, how eager! And you are here!"

Never a word did she give him, watching him with eyes surely swimming in tears, and when he sank down beside her, stroking his cheek

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with the back of her hand in an odd caress which a little boy used to find very comforting.

"Amy and the boy," he said under his breath,—“yes, they need me, I guess. And there's the work. I always did hate a quitter. I may stay?”

"You may stay."

"I hated to come. But now," with a rueful twitch of the lips,—“now I hate worse to go. But I guess I understand my orders. I'm ready, Partner."

"I knew you would feel like that!" she cried. "Is it any comfort that your father will be as proud of you as I? But first let me show you something of our life, although you will not remember."

"I can't forget."

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“But you will; you will be like the man in Fiona McLeod’s poem. You know how he recalls his vision,—

“ ‘O Soul, of that which was uttered,
O Soul, of that which thou saw;
What is there now remaineth—
Though trembling still with the
awe?
No more than of summer lingers
In wind-whirled straw!’ ”

THE spring breeze, laden with vague odors, stirred pleasantly in the sick room. It crackled the sheets of the clinical record which the woman sitting by the bedside was studying, but leaving continually to glance at the motionless face on the pillow. When the eyelids lifted the lusterless eyes met hers, and "Roger?" she ventured, with a tremulous smile.

Yes, here were the old aches, the old weariness; the weight of his years was upon him, never to be lifted this side of the grave. But the spring wind was sweet. A little junco twittered on the window-sill. It was good to see Amy flushing with delight; and old Jim's grin; and to hear Amy's rapturous whisper (when he managed a stiff smile), "Oh, Jim, he knows me!"

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"Of course I know you, Sis," he said testily. "You needn't look so meaching, Jim; I'm going to get well, however you mess the case!"

But it was three weeks later before he introduced the subject that had never left his thoughts. By then his convalescence had advanced to the stage of an easy chair by the window; and Miss Wales, the one nurse on guard, was making him porridge, while Doctor Forbes discoursed at large.

"Jim," said he without prelude, "I'm going to give you a shock and incidentally convert you to my theory of radium in sarcoma."

Jim grunted.

"I suppose if I were to convince you that I was allowed to come back from the dead to finish my job you

would think there was something in it."

"If? Yes."

"Well, when I died—"

"You didn't die. I admit you gave me a nasty scare, and the nurses thought you had gone; but I wouldn't stop working. I guess it was my Scotch obstinacy."

Roger's long supple hand closed over Forbes' strong and spatulate fingers. "Good for Scotch obstinacy!" said he. "It works both ways."

"Well, it pulled you through, all right," growled Forbes; "but even after I got a flutter from your pulse you didn't know much. Not for twenty hours; then you came up like a ball."

"For all your obstinacy," said

Roger, "and far be it from me to belittle it, you're going to admit I died. I can prove it. First by you; then by Addie Wales. Listen. You bumped the gate when you came, and you were wearing Tony's hat with the Exeter ribbon on it. Not?"

"I admit both," Forbes blinked thoughtfully; "but I laid that hat down on the table. In a subconscious state you might have seen it. And I bump gate-posts usually when I'm in a hurry; it's a very natural suggestion."

"Well, it isn't a natural suggestion, the idea of seeing Miss Wales in a pink dressing-gown with her apron wrong side out."

"But she was in the room. A subconscious cognizance—"

"Subconscious piffle!" snapped

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Roger. "I saw her in the hall trying to put a letter in her pocket that she took off the table. Maybe I could see the hall table through the back of my head; I couldn't any other way! You listen!"

He described the incident of the letter; and Addie Wales was summoned from her porridge. Yes, she admitted, she had lost a letter which she hadn't opened, although she made sure that she took it from the table just outside the door where her mail was always kept for her. She supposed that in the excitement of the time she didn't take it. She was too well trained a nurse to show emotion of any kind; yet both men suspected that under her neutral composure she was worried for some reason.

Roger directed her to the spot

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where he believed the letter to be. Forbes maintained a skeptical smile; but when the nurse returned he noticed that she was visibly paler. Hamilton had written a few words on a block of paper. This he handed to Forbes, saying:

“Miss Wales, will you please open your letter? And I am going to ask a great favor. Will you read the first sentences only, and in strict confidence show them to Doctor Forbes? Doctor, will you compare them with what I have written?”

The nurse's lips tightened as she tore open the envelope and read the first page. Without a word she showed it to Forbes. He breathed a trifle more quickly.

“It's a bit staggering,” said he. “You may say that only one person

knows the contents of this letter, the writer herself—”

“The girl who wrote that letter died last week,” said the nurse in a strained voice.

They looked at each other. Doctor Hamilton was the only absolutely calm one of the three; he thanked Miss Wales and dismissed her to her porridge. “Now, I’ll tell you what I did when I was dead, Jim,” he continued quietly.

Before the narrative was finished Forbes was pacing the floor. At the end he flung a curt surrender over his shoulder. “I don’t see how to get out of admitting your soul was out of your body; where it went is another story. But as for your confounded sarcoma theory, I had about come around to it, anyhow!”

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“That’s all I ask—”

“Cut it out! What I want now is the rest of your experience, what your mother showed you.”

“I’ve been trying to remember. I’ve been praying to remember, Jim,” said Roger wearily; “but I can’t.” He repeated under his breath, like a man in a dream:

“ ‘But, O Soul, of that which was uttered,
O Soul, of that which thou saw;
What is there now remaineth—
Though trembling still with the awe?
No more than of summer lingers
In wind-whirled straw!’ ”

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